

## II Definitions: Muhammad and the Birth of Islam

Muhammad was born in 570 (or 571) CE in Makka, a city in the central-western Arabian peninsula – an area called the Hijaz.<sup>4</sup> Makka was an important trading center because it was both coastal and central. It could mediate between traders from east and north Africa and those of the Persian Gulf, and between those coming from the southern tip of the peninsula and those coming from the north: Egypt on the one hand and Syro-Palestine on the other. A central point between very different economic trade worlds, Makka was a cosmopolitan city and also a largely pagan city.

We have abundant evidence of the spirituality of the Makkans. They seem to have centered their cults in a shrine the central element of which was a black stone that had fallen from the heavens – perhaps a meteorite. That shrine was called the *Ka'ba* and was, together with the images around it, associated with gods of nature. Ritual defined the sacred area around the *Ka'ba*. Makkans consecrated other spaces as well. They made an annual spring pilgrimage – a *hajj* – to a site two miles east of the city, where three mounds of stone (*jamras*) were piled. There they left cuttings of hair and made animal sacrifices.

These were parts of the rich religious tradition of the Makka of Muhammad's youth. Other parts probably included Christianity and certainly Judaism. The Judaism of Muhammad's time had developed in various directions and was an archipelago of spiritual and cultural islands within seas of other faiths, which themselves were not monolithic, but diverse in their sensibilities and spiritualities – and Makka was one of the places in which an island of Jews could be found. The prophet had a proclivity for wandering outside the city in the surrounding hills. At the age of forty, in the year 610 (according to the preponderant tradition) he experienced the first of a series of visions (which would continue for the rest of his life) on Mount Hira outside Makka. He was inspired by the angel Gabriel who spoke the words of God – the Arabic language word for which is 'Allah-- directly to him.<sup>5</sup> According to Muslim tradition, Gabriel had communicated God's word to Abraham, Moses, the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, and to John the Baptist and Jesus, among 28 major and scores of lesser prophetic figures. All, including Jesus, are understood to be prophets, then, forerunners of Muhammad.

Muhammad returned into Makka preaching repentance and an armageddon accompanied by judgment to be meted out against those who do not repent. Those who did repent would form a group who submitted to the will of God. Thus the faith which Muhammad was beginning to articulate is called in Arabic, *Islam*, commonly translated as meaning "submission" ("commitment" might be a better rendering): submission (commitment) to

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<sup>4</sup> Until about 25 years ago, for reasons I cannot explain, it was the norm for Anglo-American scholars to make no effort to render Arabic sounds as effectively as possible in English. The Arabic vowel system is based on a-i-u; "o" and "e" don't exist. Therefore the correct transliterations are Muslim, Muhammad, Qur'an, Makka, Madina, Hijaz, etc.

<sup>5</sup> The Arabic language *Allah* is a crasis of *al'illah--* and cognate with Hebrew *El*. Too often, Islamists will say 'Allah when speaking to a general audience, which tends to obscure the fact that the term simply means "God" – in other words, Muslims use the same term as do Jews and Christians, but in prayer and Qur'anic recitation, they are likely to use the Arabic term, as Jews will the Hebrew and many Christians the Greek or Latin, (among others), rather than the vernacular.

the will of God. Its followers are called *Muslims*—those who submit (commit) themselves to God's will.<sup>6</sup>

Muhammad preached in Makka for about a dozen years, gathering a small group of followers. Ultimately the authorities came to perceive his preaching as a threat; by the year 620 he began to plan a strategy that included a departure from the city of his birth. In 622 he and his followers went to – were invited to – a city some 250 miles (402 kilometers) to the north, called Yathrib. The tribal conflicts within Yathrib and Muhammad's reputation as an adjudicator and peace-maker combined to make him welcome there. The year of the migration – the *Hijra*, as it is called in Arabic – marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar. Yathrib would later be known as *al'Madina* (more commonly rendered simply as Madina) – “the City” – because of the importance that it would assume in the life of the prophet.

Madina/Yathrib, at the time of Muhammad's arrival, was largely inhabited by pagans but also by some Christians and Jews – to be specific, three Christian and five Jewish tribes are known by name to have resided there. The Jewish tribes were distant from the Jewish mainstream, but apparently familiar with the rabbinic traditions of commentary on the Torah and adjudication of everyday issues and problems by means of referring to the Torah and other parts of the Hebrew Bible, known as Midrash and Talmud respectively. In the course of Muhammad's years in Madina, as he developed both a political organization and a more systematic spiritual foundation for Islam he seems to have had a good deal of contact with the Jews as well as with their Christian counterparts.

If Muhammad arrived as a peacemaker, he seems to have unified the divergent groups in Yathrib by about 627/8 – which was also the time when a powerful force of Makkans, outnumbering his followers nearly five-to-one, attacked and nearly destroyed the small Muslim community. But after nearly three years of conflict marked by three signal and unexpected, zeal-and-inspiration-driven victories, Muhammad not only defeated them, he entered Makka in triumph. Contrary to the expected norm, he did not destroy his conquered enemies, but embraced them as they embraced his faith. He did destroy the idols that are said to have festooned the *Ka'ba* – but not the central stone. In other words he didn't completely sever the connection between the Makkans and their ancestors. He adopted and adapted the cult centered in the *Ka'ba*, suggesting that the rock from heaven symbolized Allah's abiding interest in and relationship with us – and moreover associating it with Abraham and Ishmael (as related in *Sura* (Chapter) 2 of the Qur'an,<sup>7</sup> where we read that Abraham and Ishmael established the *Ka'ba* together, making it the first shrine in the Abrahamic tradition).

The spiritual and the secular, the religious and the political, intermingled as Muhammad's form of faith completed its beginnings. With the political power signified by control of both Madina and Makka, the consolidation of Islam's internal world began, and the term *'umma* (cognate with the Hebrew word *'am*, and meaning “people/nation” defined by a spiritual bloodline connection) came into use for his Muslim constituents. The tribal-

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<sup>6</sup> Note the impropriety of calling Muslims “Muhammadans” or Islam itself “Muhammadanism.” Christianity derives its name from *christos* (Greek for Hebrew *mashiah*; the two words are anglicized as “christ” and “messiah” respectively), which word came to express the belief that Jesus as the Messiah was God in human form. But Muhammad is never regarded as more than a prophet, albeit the *ultimate* prophet.

<sup>7</sup> See below, xxx.

based, ethnically-driven self-definition of the two cities was superceded by the faith-based spiritually-driven reality that Muhammad's revolution had brought about.

Muhammad articulated to his followers the marriage between the practical – political organization – and the spiritual: divine election and support. He in effect said that “the Yathribians asked me to come; but it was divine agency that caused them to seek me out. And my consolidation of Madina was a function not of conquest as much as acquiescence: acquiescence to Allah on my part meant acquiescence to me on their part, all of which reflects divine agency and not just human action.” (See *Suras* 3 and 21; this is my paraphrase). For Muhammad's followers his understanding of his role in history is unequivocal; it is important to note that, over the centuries, ongoing interpretation can sometimes yield directly opposite views even of the prophet's self-conception. I know at least one contemporary Muslim scholar who maintains that Muhammad misunderstood the *means* according to which he was to take Makka: the word, rather than the sword was Allah's intended instrument, which is why the prophet died only a year or two later – analogous to Moses' death before the final crossing of the Jordan, which has been construed by the rabbinic tradition as punishment for his moments of doubt and anger.<sup>8</sup>

When he died in 632 CE, Muhammad left behind a legacy of principles set forth in ongoing discourses and sermons. These were based on the revelations to Muhammad from Allah, and they were recorded – probably written down in its definitive form within about twenty years of the prophet's death – in the *Qur'an*. That these are oral teachings is underscored by the meaning of the word *Qur'an*: “recitation.”<sup>9</sup> Most scholars assume that the prophet was illiterate – but even if he wasn't, he spoke rather than wrote the thoughts that divinely inspired him. It was some of the companions, fearful that the ideas would be lost with his death, who are said to have written down whatever they could on whatever was available, include camel bone and saddle leather.

The *Qur'an* is not a systematic narrative as the Torah is and as each of the Gospels is.<sup>10</sup> It is not the story of Muhammad's life and that of his companions, as the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles tell the story of Jesus' life and of those around him and as much of the Hebrew Bible is the story of dozens of lives from Adam and Eve to the last king of Judah. The *Qur'an* is an assemblage of speeches and discourses from Muhammad to his followers in which he is the mouthpiece through which God speaks, analogous to those parts of the Torah where Moses sermonizes, or to the words of Isaiah and the other Hebrew biblical prophets; it is filled with parables and narrative fragments.

The *Qur'an*'s 6200 verses are organized into 114 chapters (*sura* in the singular; *surat* in the plural), ordered (with the exception of the first, which is an affirmation of faith) from longest to shortest. In other words the organization is strictly aesthetic, with absolutely no story line connecting one *sura* to the next – and no way of knowing for certain which sermons came earlier and which later. Thus if one seeks to chart the development of Muhammad's thinking, one will need significant powers of interpretation. This also

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<sup>8</sup> Others would disagree, even as to the precise timing of things: they would say that the conquest of Makka took place by 628, largely through choking the city by blocking her trade routes – and that Muhammad therefore lived another 4 years, so that the argument that he was punished by Allah is specious.

<sup>9</sup> The word is cognate with the Hebrew *miqra'*, by which term Jews often refer to the Torah.

<sup>10</sup> Certainly Genesis, the first twenty or so chapters of Exodus, significant passages in Leviticus and Numbers and all of Deuteronomy represent fairly coherent narratives; between these narrative parts are sandwiched the legislative elements of the Torah.

means that ideas that appear to contradict each other (an inevitable facet of every religious tradition and its literature) will require extensive discussion. And given the fact that we cannot even know if it was all written down before or after Muhammad's death, and what may have been added, subtracted or interpolated, we are confronted with analogous questions to those we face in seeking an explanation for the different names of God used in different parts of the Torah or for the variant versions of Jesus' life and death (and its immediate aftermath) found in the different Gospels.

The difficulty of apprehending the absolute truth manifests itself soon after the prophet's death – specifically with regard to the choice of a successor. For Muhammad designated nobody (unlike Moses – who, after all, is said to have known the hour of his death in advance, and who designated Joshua the son of Nun as his successor). His key companions were divided. A minority thought that it should be 'Ali, nephew and son-in-law of Muhammad, and therefore, they agreed, most privy of them all to the prophet's innermost thoughts and ideas. The majority – for reasons unknown to us – preferred to follow Abu Bakr, longest-held and closest friend of Muhammad. The first group's belief system, as expounded by 'Ali, was called the *Shi'a*, (meaning "sect"), and that minority group within the schismatic Muslim world continues to be called *Shi'ite* to the present day. The majority called (and still call) themselves *Sunnis*. The term *Sunna* might be translated as "custom" by which is meant that Abu Bakr and his followers agreed that Muhammad preached an acceptance of many customs and traditions from among those whom Islam would come to embrace, adopting and adapting new customs and traditions in accordance with the needs of the people and thus maintaining a certain degree of flexibility for the Faith. He had exemplified this himself in his transformation of the focus on the *Ka'ba*.

By the 640s, in any case, the Muslims had swept up out of the *Hijaz* and beyond the 'Arav (in effect, the Arabian peninsula) into the Near East. Islam swallowed the Sassanian Empire to the east and Egypt and North Africa to the West. By the year 718 the new Faith extended west as far as the Pyrenees and east as far as India. Needless to say, whereas the initial Muslim conquerors were Arabs – from the 'Arav – the chain reaction of expansion, the further it got from its geographic source, was less and less an Arab expansion. A handful of Arab chieftains, for instance, led Berber armies into Spain between 711 and 718. Indeed when, five and seven centuries later, Turkic (not remotely Arab) peoples, Seljuks and then Ottomans, swept from south central Asia westward into the world of the Middle East, they embraced the Islam of those they *conquered* (about which more follows below) – so that when the Christian Byzantine Empire finally fell, its capital at Constantinople sacked in 1453, the Ottoman conquerors were Muslim conquerors (but the Muslim conquerors were not *Arab* conquerors; on the contrary, political and even cultural nationalism would evolve in the Arab world initially as a desire to throw off their Turkish masters – the Arabic word for "throwing off" is *intifada* – as we shall also discuss in more detail below).

### *The Pillars and Edifice of Islam*

The *Qur'an* is the foundational text of Islam: God's words to humanity through the conduit of Muhammad, seal of the prophets and messengers of God. It teaches that there is one God – omnipotent, omniscient, the creator of all that exists, beneficent and merciful but stern in Its judgments. Man's primary duty is to submit to the will of God; those who rebel against Allah and His prophets will be punished both in this world and in

the next. The *Qur'an* teaches that after death there is a Heaven and a Hell. Submitters/committees to God's will – *muslims* – will experience Paradise (its terms are very physical and male-oriented: delightful food, drink and beautiful maidens); rebels against it will experience Hell. At the end of time there will be a resurrection of the dead and a final judgment, an eternal disposition of soul and body. The *Qur'an* also teaches that there is predetermination toward good and evil within the world, even as we are ultimately judged and thus are assumed to have free will in the matter of our behavioral patterns. Thus an important issue throughout Islamic history has been whether or not we can change anything if everything is predetermined (the same issue assails Christianity and Judaism).<sup>11</sup> Recognizing this tension is important not only for grasping Islam but for understanding some of the socio-economic fabric of the Near Eastern world dominated by Islam.

The *Qur'an* is viewed as the last in a *series* of revelations; it follows the Torah (understood as revealed to Moses), the Psalms (understood as revealed to David), and the Gospels (understood as revealed to Jesus). Islam thus understands the Gospels not as texts written about Jesus by others but as revelations by God to Jesus – it is not clear, then, how clear Muhammad's understanding of Judaism and Christianity was, or to what extent he believed their own understandings of their own texts to be in error. He developed *his* understanding, presumably, during the time he spent in Madina conversing with spiritual leaders within the Jewish and Christian communities, listening to their sermons, and perhaps deriving a kind of "midrashic" sense of both Judaism and Christianity. Within the vast seas of beliefs that surrounded him, Muhammad presumably swam with an aural, not a written life preserver – but supplemented, of course, by what Allah Itself revealed directly to him.

As the *Qur'an* is the last of the revealed texts, Muhammad is the last prophet: the *Seal of the Prophets*. But the *Qur'an* is supplemented, as Islam moves forward beyond the prophet's life and death, by *Hadith*. These are sayings and narrative sequences which were not universally embraced and in any case are not recognized as divine in origin and thus worthy of inclusion in the *Qur'an*. They offer both words ascribed to Muhammad (the words of the Prophet, as opposed to the words of God *through* the Prophet) and accounts of him – and have on the whole acquired a stature near, but by no means equal, to that of the *Qur'an*. If the Torah and the Gospels are the heart of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, respectively, and the *Qur'an* is the equivalent of the Torah and Gospels, the *Hadith* are not quite the equivalent of the other parts of the Hebrew Bible or New Testament but far more important than, say, the rabbinic or patristic literatures are. Together, the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith* comprise the beginning of "the way" in Islam. The Arabic word summarizing this is *shari'a* – "highway" – the conceptual analogue of the Hebrew word *halakhah* (the "way to go").

*Shari'a* more specifically means a path to water. Since water is essential to survival – the more so in a desert environment such as that in which Islam was born – one recognizes how essential to survival in both the here and now and the hereafter commitment to *shari'a* is for traditional Islam. **Moreover, the term also puns on the Arabic word**

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<sup>11</sup> But this seems a particularly strong issue in at least parts of Islamic time and space. One might recall the account in T.E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* of how great an effort was required to gain active assistance from Muslim Arab associates who were more likely to consider events to be unchangeably "written" by God.

*shar*, meaning water source, for the *sharia*, the legal system that guides the life of a Muslim is as much the spiritual, emotional, psychological and intellectual source of life as water is its physical source.

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The building blocks of Islam are two: *din* ("law") and *iman* ("belief").<sup>12</sup> What belief? That there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is the Seal of the Prophets; that there are 28 other important prophets: eighteen biblical ones, three figures from the Gospels and seven from other sources, including diverse historical and legendary figures such as Alexander the Great; belief in angels and *shaitanin* (evil spirits); belief in the divine inspiration of the scriptures; belief in a last day, the day of judgment; and belief in the predetermination of good and evil in this world.

Belief together with law *are* Islam. There are five pillars that have been erected on these two foundation stones. First, a testimony of faith (as expounded in the previous paragraph), the *shahada*, is similar in the intention of its opening words ("there is no God but God") to the *sh'ma* in the Jewish tradition: "Hear (*sh'ma*) O Israel, the Lord is our God the Lord is One"—and also to the Nicene creed (in form if not substance), which expresses belief in the co-substantiality of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The second pillar is prayer. Formal prayer, *salat*, takes place five times daily, (sunrise, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and evening) although informal prayer — *du'a* — can take place anytime. During the *salat* Muslims face Makka and engage in a seven-part process that involves the entire body: going down on the knees, placing the forehead on the ground twice, coming back up, going down again, and then rising again — reciting passages from the *Qur'an* at each stage. To pray, the individual must be ritually pure: the hands, feet, eyes, ears and neck must be washed. And one must perform the *salat* in a ritually clean place. The praying space must be separated from the surrounding, profane space; this might be accomplished by using a prayer rug but also simply by laying down newspapers or paper towels on the ground. Further, praying together as a community once a week at the mosque<sup>13</sup> — Friday at noon-- though not absolutely obligatory, is regarded as desirable.

The third pillar is *zakat*, charity for pious purposes. The term *sadakah*-- free-will offerings — is also used (A Jewish reader might recognize the cognate in word as well as concept with Hebrew *Tzedaka*). The terms seem more or less interchangeable, referring to helping those in need, although *sadakah* also refers to gifts offered as acts of expiation, so it might be directed at, say, a relative whom I've offended, whereas *zakat* is the term more strictly in use with regard to charitable acts toward those such as the poor. Perhaps the highest form of *zakat* would be enabling someone without the necessary resources to make the *hajj* (see below).

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<sup>12</sup> The Arabic word *din* is the analogue of the Hebrew word *din*, but does not quite mean "judgement," as the latter does. It is more like the Hebrew word *dat*, which is usually translated as "religion" but which includes the connotations of "judgement" and "law." *Iman* is cognate with Hebrew *emunah*.

<sup>13</sup> The mosque (*masjid*) is also the communal center and, in addition to its importance for prayer, is the place where communal announcements are made from the *minbar* (pulpit). Within the mosque everyone faces toward Makka. A niche (*mihrab*-- ultimately traceable as an architectural idea to the Torah Niche in the early synagogue, which also both helped to inspire the church apse and evolved as the Holy Ark in the medieval synagogue) within the orientation (*qibla*) wall indicates the direction of Makka.

The fourth pillar is fasting – *sawm*-- during Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim year. Devout Muslims (unless they are ill, of course) fast from sunrise to sunset each day of this month. Those who cannot fast either through illness or because of other conditions, such as travel, are obligated to “make-up” those days as soon as they are able. As the Islamic calendar is a 355-day purely lunar calendar and doesn’t adjust to the solar calendar, Ramadan shifts each year 10 to 11 days back vis-à-vis the Gregorian calendar used in the west.<sup>14</sup>

The fifth pillar is pilgrimage – *hajj*. Pagan Makkans of Muhammad’s day had used the word *hajj* to refer to a two-mile periodic visit to a sacred site outside of Makka. Muhammad may have absorbed this concept into the development of his faith, just as he may have been aware of the pilgrimage traditions in Judaism and Christianity. After his death *hajj* came to refer to a journey to Makka and Madina, the locations central to the prophet’s life. If possible, every devout Muslim makes an annual *hajj* – or at least once in his/her life – to Makka, from there to Madina and back to Makka, repeating the route that Muhammad followed from the time of the *hijra*. The central focus of this is of course the *Ka’ba*, around which the pilgrim walks seven times, but includes other sacred sites in and around the Muslim capital.

There is a sixth element, not a pillar of Islam, yet a term more familiar than perhaps any other to non-Muslims: *jihad*. The word means “struggle” and contrary to the understanding of it by many Muslims as well as most non-Muslims, *jihad* need have no military connotation whatsoever. The first level of struggle is within myself, to render myself as purely and fully a Muslim – a submitter and committer to God’s will-- as possible. The second level is the struggle within the *dar al-Islam* (the realm of Islam)-- the ‘*umma*-- to render it as purely muslim (committed to God’s will) as possible. This is most obviously expressed in the centuries’ long struggle between *shi’ite* and *sunni*: what originated as a difference regarding leaders (*Khalifat*) evolved as a series of doctrinal differences over which a good deal of blood has often been spilt.<sup>15</sup>

It is fair to say that the *shi’a* tends to take the narrower, strictly textual view and the *sunna* the broader view – that includes orally transmitted customs-- of a given religious issue.<sup>16</sup> There are specific later echoes of the original basis for the schism, as well. Thus there are those who believe in the future coming of the *mahdi*, a quasi-messianic figure (the “rightly guided one,” who will effect the final victory of Islam by means of a divine

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<sup>14</sup>The Jewish calendar is lunar-solar; it also shifts about ten or eleven days every year vis-à-vis the Gregorian calendar but is adjusted by a leap year ever fourth year that interpolates an entire month (*Adar II*) to send it back to where it began.

<sup>15</sup> The spilling of blood in the context of doctrinal differences is, of course, not unique to Islam. In Christian history, for example, both the centuries following the East-West schism of 1054 and even more so the Reformation/Counter-Reformation period in the West, from the 1520s to the early eighteenth century, were marked by considerable bloodshed.

<sup>16</sup>Because word of mouth is unreliable, the *shi’ites* assert, how do the *sunnis* know that they are not interpolating customs not sanctioned by the prophet? They, the *shi’ites* know what Muhammad did and did not sanction since he spoke specifically to Ali, who transmitted the legitimate orthodox traditions (the *sunnis* consider themselves orthodox and call the *shi’ites* heterodox) from Muhammad through a line of divinely inspired *imams*. The Ayatolla Khomeini was to his followers such an infallible, divinely-inspired *imam*. He represented the largest of the *shi’ite* sects, the *imami* – one of three major *shi’ite* groups. Today, about 86% of Muslims are Sunni, and about 14% are Shi’ite.

catastrophe). Shi'ites argue that he will be a descendant of the house of 'Ali, but Sunnis dispute that assertion. The majority of Shi'ites, in fact, called "Twelvers," believe that he will be the twelfth spiritual leader in succession from 'Ali, which leader disappeared and is being held in abeyance by God until the proper moment arrives for his return.

The understanding of *jihad* shared by most non-Muslims is only its tertiary focus: to make those outside the *dar al Islam* – in the *dar al Harb*<sup>17</sup> -- recognize the ultimate truth from God that was preached by Muhammad. While that certainly can be and has been understood throughout much of Islamic history to mean a Holy War in the military sense of that phrase, even this aspect of *jihad* can be construed otherwise: that the struggle must be with the word and not the sword. It is with this idea in mind that Muhammad himself is said by some interpreters to have erred in the manner in which he conquered Makka.<sup>18</sup>

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As there are pillars of Islamic belief, there are gradations of practical observance. The first category includes *obligatory* actions, such as praying five times daily. Second are *desirable* and *recommended* actions, such as the *haji* (one genuinely without the resources to make the pilgrimage will not be deprived of his place in paradise as a consequence of that omission – but woe unto the one who could have and did not). The third category is religiously *neutral* – such as the gray area of how to relate to non-Muslims. This is by definition the category most open to discussion and differences of interpretation.

The fourth category includes actions that are *objectionable* but not forbidden. Certain foods, for example, are thusly regarded. Similarly, for a man to take more than one wife, unless he has the economic means to insure the prosperity of the entire household – and can also insure the overall happiness of more than one wife – is objectionable, but not forbidden. The fifth category includes that which is absolutely *forbidden*, such as the consumption of pork or alcohol.

Moreover, as Islam developed over the centuries, a series of different schools of interpretation emerged. Three variations of Sunni orthodoxy might be called primary. The *Hanafi* school, founded by Abdul Hanifa (who died in 767 CE) is based on patterns of belief that developed in Mesopotamia. The *Maliki* school, which developed in Madina, is associated with the name of Malik Ibn Anas (who died in 795). A third school, the *Al Shafi'i* school, based on the teachings of a ninth-century disciple of Malik Ibn Anas, combined Malik's and Hanifa's teachings. I mention these without the space to expand on their thought patterns; I merely wish to underscore the diverse, non-monolithic quality of Islam over time and across space.<sup>19</sup> Indeed many additional schools beyond these three developed between the ninth and eleventh centuries, in both the Sunni and the Shi'ite communities.

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<sup>17</sup>One can recognize the cognate between Arabic *harb* and the Hebrew *herev*; the first means "war," the second "sword."

<sup>18</sup> See below, xxxx for further discussion of *jihad*.

<sup>19</sup> However, one might understand the Hanafis (found over time mostly in India, Central Asia and Turkey as the "Rationalists"; the Malikis (found mostly in North and West Africa) as the "Traditionalists"; the Sha'ifis, (found mostly in Egypt, East Africa and Indonesia) who developed as a kind of compromise between the Hanafis and Malikis in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, as "Rationalist-Traditionalists." A fourth group of Sunnis, the Hanbalis (found in Saudi Arabia) might be labeled "Fundamentalists."



Thus an ongoing body of discourse has continued to evolve – the analogue of the rabbinic and patristic-scholastic traditions. As Judaism doesn't end with the Torah, nor with the *mishnah* or the *gemara* – discourse within Judaism continues to the present day – Islam moves from the *Qur'an* and *Hadith* and their synthesis with *sunna* (varied customs and traditions), to commentaries and discussions of specific issues adjudicated by *Muftis* – the analogues of the *rabbanim* of medieval and post-medieval Judaism and of commentators like St. Anselm, Abelard and St. Thomas Aquinas in the medieval Christian tradition. The *Muftis* have, over the centuries, recorded their opinions as *fatwas* – pronouncements on legal issues – like Jewish *responsa* literature and papal bulls. Entire collections of *fatwas* have been produced over time, focusing on how to live a life according to *shari'a*.

### *Islam, Judaism and Christianity: Theories and Practices*

I have expended so much ink on a discussion of Islam within the discussion of definitions, (to repeat), because I assume that the majority of my readers will be Christian and Jewish Americans who will have less familiarity with Islam than with their own forms of faith. Islam is a complex religion, beginning with a mixture of political and spiritual elements recorded in mixed oral and written traditions, which in turn bred a series of divergent sects, extending over a long history and a vast geography – from the Pyrenees to Southeast Asia. In each of the different parts of the Islamic world, and in different eras – Syria, Iraq, Spain, North Africa, Turkey, India, Indonesia – there arose different political structures and dynasties, which often exercised differing interpretations of religious principles. While one can reduce the foundations of Islam to five pillars as a matter of convenience, the conceptual and historical edifice is really far more complicated.

The complication is two-fold. First: how to understand the foundations in their context – the political and spiritual interweave in which Muhammad himself managed to engage is distinctly different from that in which Jesus is said to have noted that one should separate what one renders unto Caesar from what one renders to God, and that the sword should be put away, for “those who live by the sword die by the sword.” It extends beyond even where Moses stood when, with arms upheld, he encouraged the Israelites in their bloody struggle with the Amalekites. Second: how to continually reshape aspects of those foundations without undermining them in changing contexts across time and space.

For Jews and Christians, a particularly interesting facet of this issue is the degree to which Islamic customs, practices and beliefs are rooted in aspects of the two older Abrahamic faiths. Prophecy as an idea, of course, goes back to the Bible, whereas angels and *shaitanin* are far more a part of Christian than Jewish theology.<sup>20</sup> In certain respects, the prayer structure of Islam may be seen to have derived from that of Judaism, but Muhammad enlarged on Jewish practices. Rather than merely three times a day, he came to prescribe prayer five times and included the very body language of obeisance to Allah that Judaism eschews. (Not always: interestingly, Abraham Maimuni, son of Maimonides and his successor as *Nagid* of Egyptian Jewry, sought to introduce prostration into the

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<sup>20</sup>By the time of Muhammad, Judaism had already absorbed into itself the Christian tradition of angels and demons – which still prevails folkloristically in Jewish literature, although it is neither originally nor logically Jewish.

synagogue service in the early thirteenth century, inspired to do so, in fact, by the Muslim custom). Originally Muslims prayed toward Jerusalem, as Jews (and Christians) do, but after his break with the Jewish tribes of Yathrib who had initially supported him – possibly even before Makka became his capital, with the *Ka'ba* as the central shrine of Islam (for some scholars argue that his break with Yathrib's Jews came as early as 624 CE)-- the prophet redirected Muslims to pray toward Makka.

Muslims initially fasted on the tenth day of *Ramadan* (the fast was called '*Ashura*, cognate with Hebrew '*Esse*r, meaning "ten"). According to a *Hadith*, when it was pointed out to Muhammad that the Jews fasted on the tenth day of their month Tishri, he changed the Muslim fast to the ninth day; the eleventh was preferred by some; the idea was expanded to encompass the first ten days of the month until finally the entire month, from sunrise to sunset, was prescribed. The Jewish-Muslim interface is further evidenced by the fact that, whereas Jewish tradition came to connect Yom Kippur with the giving of the second set of the Decalogue to Moses, Muslim tradition speaks of the *tanzil* – the sending down of the *Qur'an* from Heaven through Gabriel to Muhammad-- as having taken place during the '*Ashura* fast.

So, too, *kashrut*, absorbed from Judaism, while in part eventually rejected by Muhammad, was retained to the extent that pork, blood and carcasses are forbidden foods; and ritual slaughter – *halal* – was decreed by the prophet for all animals intended for human consumption. Just as Judaism and Christianity diverged radically with respect to what the Second Temple period concept of *mashiah* means, the Muslim concept of the *mahdi* can be traced back to the same source but represents another variant on that theme. Where for Christianity the *mashiah* arrived specifically in the person of Jesus and it is Jesus who will return at the end of time as we know it, for Judaism a vaguer concept prevails – in part because, according to the Jewish view the messianic arrival has not yet taken place and thus whom – or what-- precisely Jews are awaiting is unclear (certainly the end of time as we know it is traditionally anticipated). The Islamic concept is specific, in that the *mahdi* will come from a particular family, to complete the work of perfecting the world begun by Muhammad – but there is disagreement, as we have observed, as to which family, and not all Muslims accept the idea at all. As in the history of Judaism there has been a number of self-proclaimed messianic figures, so within Islam there have been a number of *mahdis* proclaimed by diverse groups of followers.<sup>21</sup>

The five Jewish tribes of Yathrib with whom Muhammad was initially allied – because they were involved in struggles with each other – did not unite against Muhammad as he was both growing stronger and turning against them; they apparently failed to notice that Muhammad was becoming a dangerous enemy. In the end, he defeated them one by one.

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<sup>21</sup>The most historically significant of these is probably the Fatimid Shi'ite ruler Al'Hakim, See below, xxxx. As a separate but related or at least interesting issue, one might wonder: if Muhammad had claimed descent from the House of David, and that therefore he was the *mashiah*, he might have been accepted in the long run by the Jewish tribes of Yathrib. But he claimed to be the last prophet, (and to even suggest otherwise is to speak as a non-believer rather than a believer: for the latter Muhammad claimed to be a prophet because that is what he *was*) and that was surely anathema to them – since prophecy was assumed to have disappeared by (or shortly after) the time of Ezra, not to return again *until* the time of the *mashiah*. It is perhaps even more complicated than this: the Jews of Yathrib apparently initially perceived him as asserting a role as *mashiah* (which I don't believe he did) but, since he was not descended (didn't claim to be descended) from the House of David he could not be the *mashiah*. So ultimately he and they parted spiritual and political ways (to use an overly gentle turn of phrase).

Toward the end of the 620s, just prior to his final assault on Makka, he attacked the Oasis of Khaybar, which had become the refuge of one of the Jewish tribes that he had ousted from Yathrib/Madina. Upon defeating them after a siege of 45 days, he is said to have come to an agreement – a *dhimma*, or “pact” – which included a series of injunctions (such as the requirement that Jews cede half their produce to Muslims, and decreeing Muhammad’s right to break the agreement and expel the Jews at will) which reduced the Jews but at the same time extended a certain amount of protection to them and the right to practice their faith more or less freely.

The official version of the *dhimma* was eventually called the *Pact of Umar* – but it is not clear whether the Umar who may be called the author of the definitive written version was the Umayyad *Khalif* Umar of the mid-seventh century, or the Abbassid *Khalif* Umar of the mid-eighth century. We possess no version from Muhammad’s own time (and therefore no documentary proof that the *dhimma* as we have it stemmed in the *form* in which we have it from the prophet himself). The Jews came to be called *dhimmi* – “people of the pact.” That term over time came to refer also to Christians, Zoroastrians, Samaritans and Sabaeans – peoples with a text at the center of their faiths. It was Muhammad, indeed, who coined the phrase “People of the Book” in referring to the Jews. Peoples of the Pact were entitled to better treatment than pagans and other non-Muslims without books as their basis, in part because the prophet recognized Judaism and Christianity as older sibling forerunners, albeit misguided forerunners, of Islam.

In retrospect it is clear, indeed, that as with Jesus, so Muhammad initially saw himself as a reformer, not as the bringer into being of a new faith. But whereas the vocabulary of Jesus was specifically Judaeo-Jewish, and his followers would eventually see him as an incarnation of God Itself, Muhammad’s terms were more generally those of Islam (by which I mean that Abraham and Moses, for example, were viewed as *muslims* in that they submitted to the will of God) – and his followers never view him as any more than the ultimate messenger of God’s word to those who seek to commit themselves to God.

To summarize: each of the edifices of Judaism, Christianity and Islam stands on four “foundation stones.” They share a common belief in an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good, all-merciful God that has historically been interested and involved in human history. They share a belief in the notion of a people that is unique in its commitment and devotion to and relationship with that God, and in a key text (or texts) that offer(s) an umbilical connection between God and that people. They share a sense that there are particular places on the planet that stand out in being extraordinarily conducive to carrying out that relationship. They differ from each other with respect to how each of these four elements is interpreted: Jews and Muslims maintain the certainty that God never assumes physical form; for Christians a physical God in the person of Jesus is central to their faith. For Jews the Hebrew Bible, with the Torah as its ultimate core is the central umbilical text; for Christians, the Hebrew Bible is called the Old Testament and is viewed as a prelude to the more central New Testament, of which the ultimate core is the Gospels.<sup>22</sup> For Muslims, all of these texts, divinely-given, have become corrupted by error, over time; the Qur’an offers the definitive Divine word in which all issues are correctly presented.

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<sup>22</sup> One can, of course further subdivide. What Catholics and Orthodox Christians call intertestamental texts (Susannah, Judith, Maccabees I and II, Tobit, The Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, et al) Protestants term apocrypha; like Jews, Protestants view these as other than God’s word.

While all three Abrahamic denominations consider Jerusalem of great importance, for Christians there are other virtually equally important sites (such as Nazareth and Bethlehem) which, like Jerusalem itself, are primarily significant for their connections to the life of Jesus and his circle, rather than for Hebrew Biblical connections. Similarly, for Muslims, Jerusalem is less significant than Makka and Madina and its primary importance derives from the *Hadith* that speaks of the Rock in Jerusalem that marks a connective between heaven and earth: it is the place from which the Prophet ascended to heaven and to which he returned thence during his miraculous night ride (the '*isra*', culminating with his ascent, *mir'aj*, to the throne of God)-- rather than due to its Hebrew Biblical or New Testament connotations. Finally, the messianic idea which takes full and specific form in Christianity as God-become-human remains unspecified and vague in Judaism and in Islam the concept is variously held – but with the exception of the followers of al'Hakim (whom most Muslims consider heretical) that concept as *mahdi* never includes the assertion of God as assuming human form.